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New life for stones from the city's most famous lost landmark

Posted by: James Eli Shiffer under [Local business](#), [Parks and recreation](#), [Urban living](#) Updated: November 2, 2011 - 7:23 AM

The granite blocks stacked at a construction site on Eat Street have attracted some attention lately, especially when a foul-mouthed fellow in overalls is blasting them with an artistic flamethrower. His name is Zoran Mojsilov, a Serbian-born sculptor now carving in northeast Minneapolis, and he fashions enormous rounded structures of stone and wood, sometimes bound with iron cables.

Mojsilov's block benches will grace the plaza in Peter Remes' Ice House Court development at 26th and Nicollet. The project will feature restaurants, apartments, a coffee shop, a bar and what could be one of the nation's biggest climbing gyms. Everything about the project blends old and new — the Vertical Endeavors gym will occupy a towering brick structure that once stored blocks of ice cut from Cedar Lake.

Yet it's the blocks of New Hampshire granite that have made the strangest journey. They are the hand-carved remnants of the Metropolitan Building, Minneapolis' most famous lost landmark. The Met opened downtown in 1890 and attracted national attention for its 12-story light court, glass floors and elaborate Romanesque Revival exteriors that proclaimed the city's turn-of-the-century prosperity.

Despite a public outcry from preservationists, the city tore the building down in 1961 as part of its determination to wipe away the Gateway District neighborhood that housed the region's infamous Skid Row. Someone realized that the huge arches, column capitals and other ornamented stonework might be worth keeping, so about 250 granite chunks were trucked to a stone company in Delano and dumped in a field.

That's where they sat for nearly 50 years, until the business changed hands and the new owner of the stone business offered them for sale, warning that if someone didn't buy them, they might be ground into gravel.

Remes found out about the stones and bought them for several projects, including Ice House Court. He tore down a building to make room for a new plaza designed by Julie Snow Architects. A few months ago, he got Mojsilov involved.

While Mojsilov is impressed by the workmanship of the stones, he had no intention of leaving them all alone. He cuts grooves with a diamond-bladed saw and smooths them with a propane torch that scalds them so intensely that chips fly off in every direction.

Sometimes the flakes of stone burn holes through his shirt and land on his neck. He knows he's been hit by the shrapnel when he smells his skin burning. It reminds him of pork chops. Mayor R.T. Rybak visited the site the other day and was clearly moved to see the Metropolitan Building remains. "I believe these stones are laced with the heart of Minneapolis," he said.

Mojsilov is less sentimental. "You let them knock down the whole goddamned thing," he says to anyone who makes the argument that these are sacred things. By reshaping these stones, "I'm collaborating with dead people," he said.

Once the plaza opens, possibly later this month, the sculpting will continue.

"People keep working on these stones," with their posteriors smoothing them out little by little, the sculptor says. So in this part of Minneapolis, whether you're an artist depends on where you sit.